

“Being Good Shepherds” by John Morris

John Morris

Being Good Shepherds

This morning I want to talk about animal welfare and how Christians might respond. It is a topic that I am passionate about, and it has been very close to my heart for the past ten or so years.

I must acknowledge my debt to Matthew Scully's book *Dominion* for many of the ideas and examples in this sermon. (Yes, that is the same Matthew Scully who used to work for the Bush administration, and no, he has not changed his political stripes. He is still very much a conservative, and I think that is a great illustration of how a concern for animal welfare cuts across all traditional political lines.)

To begin with, what does Scripture say about our relationships and duties to animals? It does not say much. There is very little direct reference to moral conduct with regard to animals. There is Genesis 29, which may be taken as a recommendation of vegetarianism: “Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.’” (No, the Lord does not go on to say that animals can also be our food, just the plants.)

Some writers about animal welfare believe that the subject is largely absent from the Bible because there were in fact few choices open to Biblical people. Wearing the skins of animals and eating their flesh were probably necessary for survival. There are, however, two key Biblical passages, one from the Old Testament, one from the New, that are significant. The first is the passage from Genesis 1:26-28, so often quoted by those who believe we have no duties, of mercy or any other kind, toward animals: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"

Therefore, our heavenly parent has given us dominion, or stewardship, over the animals. Moreover, she has made us in her own image.

We now flip forward several zillion millennia, to the time of Jesus. As Christians, we believe that to know Christ is to know God; we believe that Jesus is our best way of understanding what it truly means to be a child of God, to live as if we were made in God's image. And what do we find to be at the center of Jesus' way? "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'"

So – and I realize this is not exactly news to you, though it

remains very good news for all of us – our Christian religion is a path of love. **Everything** – all the law and the prophets – follows from this. Moreover, one of the things that followed, I hope unchallenged by anyone here, is that **mercy** for the innocent ones, the helpless, the powerless, is one of the strongest and most Christ-like manifestations of divine love. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” Christians have recommended mercy in every age and every culture.

Therefore, we have dominion over the animals, and as Christians, we must live in love and mercy. What sort of rulers or stewards, then, are we to be?

You may have noticed that I have not used the term “animal rights.” That is deliberate. For one thing, it tends to be a provocative phrase that many people associate with causes and actions they deplore. Much more importantly, I am not sure that animals do have “rights” in any sense that can help us understand our Christian duties toward them. So let us say that animals have no rights whatsoever. We are free to do as we like with them.

When we consider, then, how we might treat animals, we might begin with one fact: Animals suffer. They feel pain intensely, they try to avoid it and they try to make it stop. Anyone who has owned a pet knows this, and any good pet owner does all that he or she can to keep the animal from suffering. We regard people who deliberately cause animals suffering to be sick or evil. In short, we share with our fellow animals a horror of pain. I can think of no fate worse than being tortured to death. Based on the behavior of the cats and dogs I have known, they appear to feel the same way.

Amazingly, some scientists and philosophers have tried to argue that whatever pain animals may feel is somehow different, or lesser, or “morally irrelevant,” compared to human suffering. To give you a sense of the lengths to which bad argument can go, here is an example, and it is not some fringe position, but one widely held by opponents of animal welfare. Animals, this argument goes, cannot reflect on their own suffering (or on anything else). They exist in an eternal present. When a sensation has passed, they forget it and are back to normal. In this they differ from human animals, who have the capacity to think about their experiences and therefore (this part is not very clear to me) imbue them with a higher spiritual and moral significance.

Well, when I am walking through the woods and I trip over a log and break my leg, I am not spending a whole lot of time reflecting on my suffering. What I am doing is screaming very loudly. I am in intense pain and I want it to stop. My behavior is no different from any other animal with a broken limb; it is hard to know on what grounds we would therefore suppose that the animal’s pain is experienced differently. The self-reflective abilities of my higher brain have nothing to do with the animal-brain experience of excruciating suffering.

As for the idea that animals go blithely back to normal after an experience of suffering, any pet owner can tell you that it is not true. Puppies who were mistreated are scarred for life by this experience. They remember vividly the cruelty they suffered, and may never heal from it, remaining distrustful and unhappy around humans. Even a mouse will shun the electric shock that to which so-called scientists subject them.

Here I want to insert a caveat. I am not myself certain that **all** animals feel pain. A gnat is an animal. So is a bacterium.

So is a scallop. At some point down the ladder of biological complexity, it becomes reasonable to ask questions about the capacity of these creatures to feel pain, and reasonable people may disagree about the answers. So for the purposes of my sermon, please understand "animal" to refer to the vast majority of our brother and sister creatures who, obviously and uncontroversially, can be seen to suffer intensely when in pain.

I hope we can agree that this animal pain is real, and no different from the pain we human animals feel. As we consider our dominion over them, what, if anything, follows from the reality of animal suffering?

My suggestion is not very radical or brilliant. It is simply this: Good Christian rulers or stewards, given complete authority over their subjects, will be following Christ if they try to avoid and eliminate unnecessary suffering among their subjects. They will be walking away from Christ if, seeing unnecessary suffering in the realm God has given them to administer, they ignore it or try to claim a false necessity for it.

Here, of course, we reach a critical point, and a critical word: "unnecessary." I am telling you that nearly all the suffering we inflict on animals in our culture is unnecessary, and you have every right to question this. Let me briefly tell you why I believe it.

To begin with, the idea that it's necessary to wear leather, fur, or other products that require the inhumane raising and slaughtering of animals is pretty easy to dismiss. Again, please remember that I am speaking of the United States in

2006. Even more specifically, I am speaking of our community here, a group of educated, middle-class Americans whose choices are many. I am not nearly familiar enough with the cultural realities of other parts of the globe to speak about what may be necessary for them. Nor would I presume to dictate moral choices to poor and oppressed people in our own country. Nevertheless, for us, there are so many widely available non-animal substitutes for fur and leather that I cannot seriously imagine anyone claiming that he or she has no choice but to buy animal products. To be fair, leather substitutes are often troublesome to come by, and even 20 years ago might have proved impossible, but that is no longer true. They are also often less attractive. However, if we start to weigh our own attractiveness above the suffering of others, we are embarking on a very dangerous path indeed.

Next, we come to the meat industry. If I were to spend the next few minutes showing you pictures of the conditions at a typical – and I promise you, it **is** typical – factory farm, you would not thank me. I would not show those pictures to anyone who did not ask to see them. I will not inflict them on this captive audience. (Visit <http://www.factoryfarming.com/gallery.htm> if you have a strong stomach. This entire website is very informative.) Rather, I will tell you just a few things about the meat industry.

First, the term “factory farm” will shortly become pointless as a term of differentiation because there will be nothing **but** factory farms in the U.S. Four companies now produce 81 percent of cows brought to market, 73 percent of sheep, half our chickens and 60 percent of our hogs. These percentages have greatly increased in the last 10 years, and continue to grow. As for the conditions in these so-called farms, let me choose one shameful fact out of many: About 80 million of the

95 million hogs slaughtered each year in the U.S. are intensively reared in mass-confinement warehouses, “never once in their time on earth feeling soil or sunshine. They are genetically designed by machines, inseminated by machines, fed by machines.” (Scully) They are not permitted to mother their young. They are allotted boxes so small they cannot lie down or even turn around, and fall victim to gruesome illnesses and injuries, without benefit of veterinary care. Then, of course, they are butchered. As Matthew Scully says, “If you could walk all of humanity through one of these places, 90 percent would never touch meat again.”

We are confronted by a rising tide of suffering. Far from taking steps to change and alleviate the conditions of animals raised for slaughter, the meat industry is moving as quickly as possible in the opposite direction. Every new attempt to breed meatier meat-animals is accompanied by further degradations of the conditions in which these animals live and die. Old MacDonald’s farm is outdated.

Well, is it necessary? Do we have to eat meat? The answer of course is no. Of all the marvelous technological changes that our society has placed at our disposal, one of the most exciting is that we can now subsist healthily and happily on a vegetarian diet. You have probably read that non-meat-eaters are as a group healthier; this is true, and I would be glad to point you to the documentation for this. (See, for instance, <http://www.veggie123.com/veggie/chapter5/>. There are many tips here about creating vegetarian options, too.) You may also have read that a shift to non-animal protein sources would be an inestimable boon to the world’s economy, especially in poor nations. This is also true, and again I can direct you to more information about this. (*Eating with Conscience: The Bioethics of Food* has a lot of good information. See

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0939165309/qid=990997330/sr=1-2/ref=sc_b_2/107-2942964-3956533.

So, if the suffering of animals in the meat industry is so acute, and their consumption by us so unnecessary, why do we continue to do it? Two reasons, I think. My meat-eating friends tell me, first, that they have a hard time facing the diminishment of variety and epicurean pleasure that would result from eliminating cows, pigs, lambs and fowl from their diet. Second, they tell me that switching to a largely vegetarian diet would involve tremendous inconvenience. We are a meat-eating culture and most restaurants and grocery stores, they believe, are not set up to accommodate vegetarians.

To take this latter point first: A generation ago, it had some cogency. Vegetarianism was a wacko belief, and no restaurant or store felt the slightest obligation to cater to it. This is no longer true. I do not encounter the slightest difficulty finding a vegetarian meal in just about any restaurant I enter. This is the Nation's Capital in 2006 – the choices are many, and delicious. As for cooking, it is true that Katie and I have to go out of our way a bit to find some of the ingredients we enjoy. By “out of our way a bit,” I mean a trip to Mom's Organic Market or Trader Joe's rather than the local Safeway. This, I assure you, is not a deadly obstacle to being vegetarian. It is a minor bit of mindfulness, easily worked into the weekly schedule.

What about the first objection my meat-eating friends raise – that food just will not be as various, or as tasty, without meat? I have two responses to this. The first is, “Of course you're right” on the question of variety. Vegetarians have far fewer choices than meat-eaters. As for “tasty” – personally, I

love the taste of meat. The thought of a sizzling rare steak makes my mouth water even when I know well the price in suffering that was paid to put it in front of me. Nevertheless, vegetarian meals, when well prepared, are also extremely tasty. You have to learn a few new tricks, but they are worth it, and every time Katie and I get bored with what we are eating, it is an incentive to add a new dish to our repertoire.

Now I come to the final, and most difficult, example of unnecessary animal suffering: the use of animals in laboratory experiments. It is a complex topic, and this sermon needs to end, so I hope you will forgive me if I jump rather quickly to an assertion: The scientific community has now acknowledged that, in the majority of cases, experimentation upon animals is no longer necessary and in fact is no longer the best way of testing medical advances. You need not take my word for it, but I am trying to be as brief as possible; I will gladly direct you to more information about this. (A good introduction to this very complicated subject is <http://www.mrmcmed.org/main.html>.)

The key point is that, as Congress declared not long ago, "Methods of testing that do not use animals are being and continue to be developed which are faster, less expensive, and more accurate than traditional animal experiments for some purposes." These better methods include computer modeling, noninvasive technologies like MRIs, molecular analysis and gene studies, and in vitro techniques that are often more sensitive and accurate than the traditional tests on rats and mice.

Note, however, that phrase "for some purposes." I am sure there remains a question for you as to whether **all** animal testing can in fact be dispensed with. The great Christian anti-vivisectionist G. K. Chesterton has a wonderful passage

about this, in which he responds to everyone's favorite challenge: "Suppose it was a beloved family member who was dying? Would you not permit – indeed, urge – experiments on animals if there were a drug or procedure that might save her life?" Chesterton says this:

Vivisection is not done by a man whose wife is dying. If it were, it might be lifted to the level of the moment, as would be lying or stealing bread, or any other ugly action. But this ugly action is done in cold blood, at leisure, by men who are not sure that it will be of any use to anybody – men of whom the most that can be said is that they may conceivably save the life of somebody else's wife in some remote future. That is too cold and distant to rob the act of its immediate horror. That is like training a child to tell lies for the sake of some great dilemma that may never come to him.

In the end, though, I have not the expertise or the call to persuade you that every act of animal experimentation is unnecessary. I am more than content to leave it at this: The great majority of them are, so let us concentrate our mercy on those, now, without delaying while we try to resolve the issue for all time. In doing so, we will spare millions of animals every year.

I want to end this sermon with a couple of requests for merciful action. I hope they will not seem onerous, and will strike you as within the spirit of this particular Body of Christ. First, I suggest that you look over your wardrobe and note which leather or fur articles may need replacing soon. Then consider replacing them with non-animal products. I will be glad to guide you to websites and stores that make this quite easy. (A great place to start is <http://www.alternativeoutfitters.com/>.)

My second request is that you abstain from meat once a week. Along with your abstinence on that day, I would like you to spend some time in prayer on the subject of animal welfare. In other words, use your meat fast as a mindful way of raising the question before God. I do not know what God will say to you. I hope you will take the opportunity to find out. On that same meat fast day, I strongly suggest you go out to a restaurant that specializes in good vegetarian cooking and treat yourself to a delicious meal of tofu cutlets marinated in Indonesian sate sauce with curled shiitake mushrooms! Mmmm good!

The call to respond to the suffering of animals is a call to our sense of mercy, not justice. Animals may or may not have rights; they are most certainly powerless before us. It is a call on our compassion. It is a call to be good stewards, or good rulers, however you prefer to conceive it. By acting mercifully toward animals, we can spare them unknowable suffering. I believe it is the kind of thing that Christians are particularly called to do, or at least not turn away from without deep reflection.

I will end by reading the final stanzas of a poem I wrote a few years ago, when they first cloned sheep. You may not recall that vivisectionists promptly used this scientific marvel: They infected the cloned sheep with cystic fibrosis, then tried – and failed – to cure them. I call the poem “Clone,” and I wrote it from the point of view of a cloned sheep. It concludes:

You really cloned me
for that, to suffer your disease?
If only you'd wanted more of me

because you liked me, because
there were not enough sheep
in the world to point to and praise,
because our bland faces
and musky woolen scent inspired
a vast and irrational campaign:
A sheep on every lawn!

Baaa! Baaa! *Baa-haugh!* –*chhaaugh!* There,
it's begun, I feel
my engineered death clutch my lungs. . .
I'm only a sheep,
of course. I can't put the fear of God into you.
Nothing will. Now leave me be
with my damned DNA, bleating
for the good shepherd.